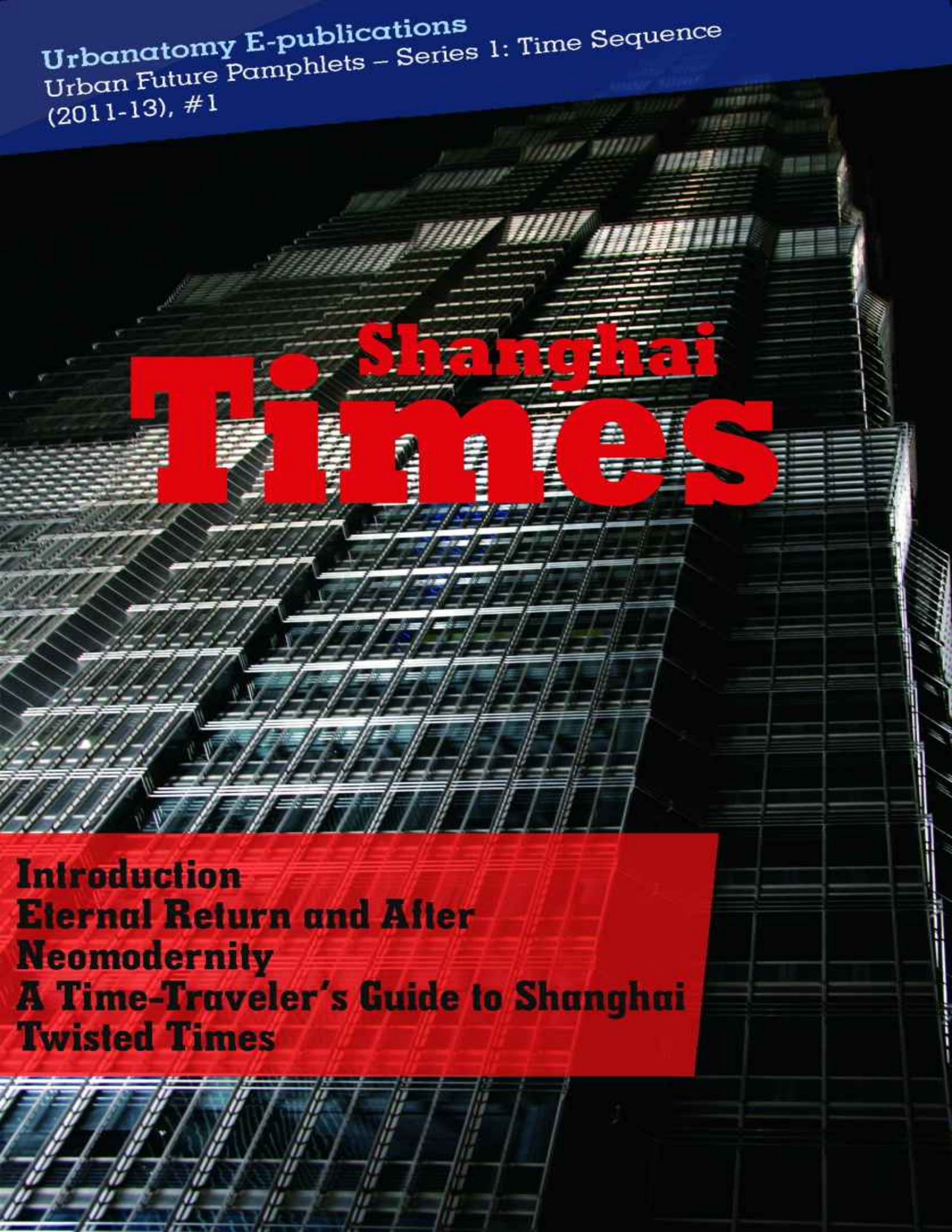
Urbanatomy E-publications
Urban Future Pamphlets – Series 1: Time Sequence
(2011-13), #1



Shanghai Times

Introduction
Eternal Return and After
Neomodernity
A Time-Traveler's Guide to Shanghai
Twisted Times

Urbanatomy Electronic

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Series 1: Time Sequence (2011-13), #1

Shanghai Times

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Introduction

Urban Future Pamphlets bundle short essay length pieces and series from the first two years of the *Urban Future* blog together with introductions that provide a retrospective overview and commentary. The first pamphlet series from this period, to be published in three parts, gathers every substantial post primarily focused upon the topic of time.

The pieces selected for this first pamphlet were written between March 2011 and February 2013. With the exception of the first essay (which restricts itself to the time-structure of modernity in general) they all explore the intersection between the shape of time and the city of Shanghai. The integration of urban and temporal analysis, towards which they tend, envisages the city as a spontaneously self-assembling time-machine, which is to say: as a process that cannot simply be included within a general history. Time is warped by urban density, with a predictability that would be no less reliable than the curving of space by mass, were it not that predictability (even in its most minimalistic conception) has internal dependency upon an untangled time-line.

Eternal Return and After (March 2011) poses modernity as a problem, at the highest level of abstraction. 'Modernity' describes an unprecedented cultural enterprise, which is that of leaving the nursery of eternal recurrence, propelling history onto an inconclusive path between cyclical and progressive time. The conceptual step taken here is a modest one. It directs little attention to the crucial possibility that modernity is something that happens to time (and not only within it), and still less to the guiding figure of the spiral, which cyclicity and progression compose together. In a later short essay ('Moore and More', May 2011), this last element is explicitly indicated:

The trend of modern time to Cycles cannot be dismissed from futuristic speculation (they always come back), but they no

*longer define it. Since the beginning of the electronic era, their contribution to the shape of the future has been progressively marginalized. [...] Whilst crystallizing (*in silico) *the inherent acceleration of neo-modern, linear time, Moore's Law is intrinsically nonlinear, for at least two reasons. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, it expresses the positive feedback dynamics of technological industrialism, in which rapidly-advancing electronic machines continuously revolutionize their own manufacturing infrastructure. Better chips make better robots make better chips, in a spiraling acceleration. Secondly, Moore's Law is at once an observation, and a program [which is to say, a self-fulfilling prophecy].*

Neomodernity (April 2011) locks the discussion of modern time onto concrete urban and architectural references. Conceptually, it advances into the spiral, pursued as the figure of innovative repetition, and as the reflexive integrity of historical process and cultural apprehension. It is piloted on this course by the condensation of Modernity 2.0 within the Shanghai city-scape – an unprecedented event that is simultaneously a return, and a restoration, whose governing aesthetic seizes (or encapsulated) modernity as an object. In neomodernity, modernity is caught turning back into itself as it hurtles forwards. Self-referential urban development has become intrinsically philosophical.

A Time-Traveler's Guide to Shanghai (three-part series, July 2011) escalates the topic of historical nonlinearity towards its culmination, in which massively-accelerated urban process crosses over into a systematic scrambling of the time-line. At an escape threshold of cybernetic intensity, feedback circuitry produces such extreme causal torsion that it unsettles the historical order of connections. Past and future are twisted from succession to the brink of interactivity, with explosive cultural consequences. The city operates as the analog of an elaborate time-travel scenario, in which an obscure labyrinth of fate is taking shape, and has always been taking shape.

Twisted Times (Part One, February 2013) is a transitional text, taken out of sequence, and projected back among the early pieces in this pamphlet due to its irresistible topical relevance. Devoted to the Shanghai-situated time-travel movie *Looper*, it initiates a “multi-installment investigation of tangled time-circuitry” which remains in process, while celebrating the widening recognition that chronological disruption is no less essential to the identity of Shanghai than *Xiaolongbao*.

Nick Land (December, 2013)

Eternal Return and After

If occult knowledge is unavailable, futurology must rely upon historical patterns. Ultimately, some variant of extrapolation is its only resource.

The hazards of extrapolation are manifold, and frequently discussed. A seemingly robust trend can be illusory, the shape of its curve can be misrecognized, and coincidental processes can disrupt it. Even more insidiously, the recognition of a trend can lead to responses that transform or nullify it.

Yet, since governments, businesses, and individuals necessarily act in accordance with models of the future, forecasting is an incessant, inevitable, and often automatic feature of social existence. Whatever the complexities of prediction, survival depends upon future-adapted decision-making. A base-level futurism is simply unavoidable. Radical skepticism, irrespective of its intellectual merits, does not offer a practical alternative.

There are only four fundamental ways things can go: they can remain the same, they can cycle, they can shrink, or they can grow. In reality these trend-lines are usually inter-tangled. Among complex systems, stability is typically meta-stability, which is preserved through cycling, whilst growth and shrinkage are often components of a larger-scale, cyclic wave.

The historical imagination of all ancient cultures was dominated by great cycles. In the Vedic culture of India, time unfolded as regular, degenerative epochs (*yugas*) that subdivided each ‘Day of Brahma’ (4.1 billion years in length). Chinese time was shaped by the metabolism of Imperial dynasties. "Long united, the empire must divide. Long divided, it must unite," begins *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Mesoamerican civilizations envisaged world history as a succession of creations and destructions. In the West, Plato described the history of the city as a

great cycle, degenerating through phases of Timocracy (or rule by the virtuous), Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny.

The ages of mankind described by Hesiod, and later Ovid, are less obviously cyclical, as is the eschatological time inherited from ancient Judaism by the Abrahamic faiths. In these cases too, however, the course of history is understood as fundamentally degenerative, and guided to the restoration of a sacred origin (as described by Mircea Eliade in his analysis of the myth of Eternal Return).

Even Karl Marx remains captivated by this mythic historical pattern, in its Abrahamic variant. His epic of human social development begins with an Edenic ‘primitive communism’ that falls into the alienated degeneracy of class society, subdivided into a series of ages. The eschatological culmination of history in communist revolution thus completes a great cycle, sealed by a moment of sacred restoration (of authentic ‘species being’). It is no coincidence that this mytho-religious ‘big-picture’ aspect of Marxism has impinged far more deeply upon popular consciousness than its intricate mathematical model of techno-economic dynamics within ‘the capitalist mode of production’, despite the fact that Marx’s writings are overwhelmingly focused upon the latter. A great cycle feels like home.

In modern times, the clearest example of history in the ancient, great cycle mode, is found in the work of another German socialist philosopher: Oswald Spengler. Modeling civilizations on the life-cycles of organic beings, he plotted their rise and inevitable decay through predictable phases [10]. For the West, firmly locked into the downside of the wave, relentless, accelerating degeneration can be confidently anticipated. Spengler’s withering pessimism seems not to have detracted significantly from the cultural comfort derived from his archetypal historical scheme.

Eliade describes the myth of Eternal Return as a refuge from the ‘terror of history’. Firmly rooted in familiar organic patterns and the cycle of the seasons, it sets the basic template for traditional

cultures. By identifying what is yet to come with what has already been timelessly commemorated, it promises the pre-adaptation of existing social arrangements and patterns of behavior to unencountered things, psychologically neutralizing the threat of radically unprecedented eventualities. We have been here before, and somehow we survived. Winter does not last forever.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the conception of progressive historical time has been so slow to consolidate itself. John M. Smart, summarizes the conclusions reached by historian J. D. Bury in his The Idea of Progress (1920), noting: “ the idea of progress in the material realm was missed, amazingly, even for most of the European Renaissance (14th-17th century). Only by the 1650s, near the end of this cultural explosion, did the idea of an unstoppable force of progress finally begin to emerge as a possibility to the average literate mind” [1]. The idea of progress, as continuous, innovative growth, is unique to modernity, and provides its defining cultural characteristic.

Moderns found themselves, for the first time, cast outside the cosmic nursery of Eternal Return. A strange new world awaited them.

Notes

[1] http://www.accelerationwatch.com/history_brief.html

Neomodernity

Claims to have discovered, or invented, the neomodern, neomodernity, or neomodernism have been announced in fields as varied as the fine arts, political and moral philosophy, theology, economics, memetics, chess, and apparently bathroom design. In sociology, Ulrich Beck's "second modernity" is a close equivalent.

As with modernism and postmodernism, it is architecture that is central to the enduring public definition of neomodernity. Philosophers have only ever interpreted the world, but architects get to build it. Although still inchoate, a neomodern architectural landscape is quite unmistakably under construction. This is especially evident in Shanghai.

When guided by actual architectural construction, the thread leading to Shanghai neomodernity begins in Turin, with Renzo Piano's 1989 'restoration' of the Fiat Lingotto Factory. This work was exemplary in a number of respects. It balanced creation with renovation, radically upgrading and re-purposing an existing, large-scale structure, whilst venerating the original. The factory was already an iconic modernist edifice, immortalized in Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* (1923). Piano's multi-use design mixed functional revolution with structural conservation. Hyper-contemporary features (including a rooftop bubble and new window system) employed light, transparent materials, in order to minimize structural (whilst maximizing functional) impact. In this way, an industrial plant was transformed into a hotel, leisure, exhibition and conference space, through aesthetic recapitulation of industrial heritage. The neomodern template had been laid.

It might reasonably be argued that the modern is always and inherently neomodern, that relentless, self-surpassing upgrades are hard-wired into it, from the beginning. Yet the complicating prefix is important and informative, as Piano's demonstrates. Rather than expressing smooth, continuous improvement, neomodern

construction manifests, and celebrates, discontinuity. Modernity is split and becomes, in part, past. The semi-paradoxical notion of ‘modernist heritage’ becomes an animating, or re-animating, inspiration.

Modernity dates awkwardly, and intriguingly, because it positions itself upon the leading edge of time, expressing an infusion from the future. In its vital, colloquial sense, the ‘modern’ is an indexical term that describes what is happening now, or recently. It is in this sense that modernization remains irrepressibly up-to-date, anchored, indexically, to the contemporary. To slip unanchored from the ‘now’ into the dead waters of history is thus to forsake the claim to modernity. What is distinctively past cannot be modern, and the modern cannot be simply past.

Whilst ‘vulgar’ by the standards of intellectual and technical usage, it is this popular sense of the ‘modern’ that generates its intense, agitational force. Even amongst the intelligentsia, postmodernism drew its powers of incitement from the implicit, incomprehensible claim to inhabit a moment beyond now. Whilst it is no great stretch to make the dilation or contraction of ‘now’ compatible with intuition, to float a contemporary state on the far side of now invites stimulating perplexity. (The Chinese ‘now’ is telling in this regard, with *xianzai* literally indicating the ‘place’ we are ‘first at’, where we always start, beginning arithmetically.)

In the fine arts, the consensual distinction between the ‘modern’ and the ‘contemporary’ resolves this tension, but only by draining the word ‘modern’ of its colloquial and provocative sense, leaving only a husk of historical reference. To care about these words and movements, however, is to insist that modernity, even primordial modernity, resists absorption into accomplished history, because it relates to an absolute future. The dynamized now of modernity is irreducible to a period or moment in time. What modernity discovered, and perpetually recalls, was not just the next thing up the road, but the road ahead in general, and perhaps even the road.

Shanghai reached escape velocity into neomodernity comparatively recently. The turn-of-the-millennium Xintiandi development, for instance, was a mile-stone in urban restoration, but was only embryonically, and perhaps also retrospectively, neomodern. A far clearer example of the architectural trends represented by Piano is found at the Red Town development, which dates back to 2004.

The archetypal neomodern project is a ‘creative cluster’, and Red Town is no exception. It consists of a radically renovated industrial site, re-animated as an arts and leisure hub. At its geographical edge, and conceptual center, sits the huge shell of the Shanghai Steel Company’s old No.10 Steel Plant, now home to the Shanghai Sculpture Space (SSS). In definitive neomodern style, the monumental relics of heavy industry have been embraced and re-vitalized: not merely restored, but aesthetically transfigured.

In the first years of the SSS, huge pieces of rusted machinery, extracted from the re-purposed buildings, lay scattered amongst and alongside the outdoor sculptures, as if deliberately scrambling the boundaries of art and scrap. Some of this detritus, most notably a jumble of massive gutters that once served as conduits for molten metal, have been reborn as postindustrial artworks.

At the heart of the neomodern lies something akin to a field of ruins, yet there is nothing remotely Ozymandian about these remains. They attest more strongly to resilient (if interrupted) survival, than to disappearance and oblivion. Their message is renaissance.

Above all, perhaps, the neomodern is manifested indirectly, through display spaces. It points away from itself, and towards what it revives, in the manner of contemporary museum design, with its ideal of invisible mediation. Its pride is adapted to an information age, in which subtlety trumps assertion, inventive perception supplants self-expression, and flexible anticipation outperforms stubborn purpose.

“We want to demolish museums and libraries” Marinetti declared, in his futurist manifesto, raging against the dead hand of the past. Yet, to make a museum exhibit of modernity is not to mortify, but rather the opposite. The tenacious vitality of the modern is conspicuously demonstrated by the fact that it has not remained what it was. The death of the shell is the life of the chick.

The Shanghai neomodern style is at once jarringly crude and hyper-refined, orchestrating a hard (or hard/soft) juxtaposition of heavy metal remnants and intangible design. It exults in the most cyclopean, stressed, and time-tortured structures: scorched and rusted girders, massive chains, vast slabs of semi-crumbled brickwork, pitted concrete, splintered masonry, the cavernous, eroded shells of warehouses and machine shops. Its preferred heritage components are characterized by relentlessly prosaic, brutal, industrial functionalism, expressed on a mind-crushing scale.

Around and amongst these paleo-modernist dinosaur skeletons, it weaves an exquisite web of maximally-dematerialized and near-transparent structures, emphasizing lightness, subtlety, openness, and innovation. High-bandwidth digital communications, intelligent environmental control systems, hydroponically-nourished creeping plants, hyper-designed furnishings, tastefully understated interior decoration and sophisticated artworks complete the metamorphosis.

Neomodernity is at once more modernity, and modernity again. By synthesizing (accelerating) progressive change with cyclic recurrence, it produces a distinctive schema or figure: the time spiral. But that is to get a little beyond ourselves …

Postcript

With peculiar synchronicity, half an hour after posting this, a copy of Wonsuk Chang's essay 'Reflections on Time and Related Ideas in the Yijing' arrived in my inbox. The article ends:

"Time in the Yijing may serve a conservative purpose - namely, restoring the past. But it also serves the creative purpose of producing novelty. These two aspects of time do not contradict each other. Many passages in the Yijing, if not all, express that what restores the past simultaneously involves some element of novel creation. The process begins from its incipient movement and finally reaches the point where creative novelty emerges. This evolutionary process is that of an advancing spiral, which ever produces novelty while simultaneously returning again and again to the nascent sources."

A Time-Traveler’s Guide to Shanghai

Return to the future

There is a strange, time-fractured moment in the biopic Deng Xiaoping (2002, directed by Yinnan Ding). For most of its length, the film is sober, cautious, and respectful, exemplifying a didactic realism. It strictly conforms to the approved story of Deng’s leadership and its meaning (exactly as it is found today in the nation’s school textbooks). Beginning with Deng’s ascent to power in the ruined China of the late-1970s, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, it follows the path of his decision-making, through the restoration (de-collectivization) of the rural economy, the re-habilitation of persecuted experts and intellectuals, and the beginning of the open-door policy, in Shenzhen, to the extension of market-oriented reform throughout the country, as symbolized by the opening of Shanghai.

Whilst clearly something of a carefully edited and precision-manufactured legend, this basic narrative of national regeneration, emancipation and growth - salvaged from the ashes of dead-end fanaticism and civilizational regression - is honest enough to inform, and even to inspire. It leaves no doubt that the ‘meaning’ of Deng Xiaoping is openness and renaissance (at least '70/30'), a judgment that is both popularly endorsed in China, and historically attested universally.

As the movie approaches its conclusion, however, pedestrian realism is suddenly supplanted by something entirely different, whether due to the ‘deeper’ realism of budgetary constraint, or the ‘higher’ realism of artistic serendipity. Deng Xiaoping, from the vantage point of a ‘yet’ (in 1992) inexistent bridge, gestures towards Pudong and announces the green-light for its developmental liberation. Yet, in the background of the scene, the deliriously developed Lujiazui of 2002 already soars, as if the skyline had been

condensed from a pre-emptive vision, drawing its substance from the historical implication of his words. The future couldn't wait.

Perhaps the speed of Shanghai's Reform-era urban development has led everything to get ahead of itself, disordering the structure of time. The Oriental Pearl TV Tower, first architectural statement of the new Shanghai and still the most iconic, certainly suggests so. Retro-deposited into the Pudong of 1992 by the Deng Xiaoping movie, historically completed in 1994, symbolically heralding the promised Shanghai of the third millennium, architecturally side-stepping into a science fiction fantasy of the 1950s, alluding to poetic imagery from the Tang Dynasty, and containing a museum devoted to the city's modern history in its pedestal, when, exactly, does this structure belong? It's hard to know where to begin.

The Emporis profile of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower describes its architectural style as simply 'modernism', which is unobjectionable, but extraordinarily under-determining. If the modern defines itself through the present, conceived as a break from the past and a projection into the future, the Oriental Pearl TV Tower unquestionably installs itself in modernity, but only by way of an elaborate path. It reverts to the present from a discarded future, whilst excavating an unused future from the past.

Buildings that arrive in the present in this way are, strictly speaking, 'fabulous', and for this reason, they are considered disreputable by the dominant traditions of international architecture. The fables they feed upon belong to the popular culture of science fiction, which makes them over-expressive, vulgarly communicative, and rapidly dated. Insofar as their style is recognized generically, it is tagged by ugly and dismissive labels such as Googie, Populuxe, and Doo-Wop. By reaching out too eagerly for the future, it is tacitly suggested, one quickly comes to look ridiculous (although, today, neomodernists such as Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas are recuperating certain elements of this style more sympathetically).

Shanghai’s Radisson Hotel, set back from the north of People’s Square, is a quintessentially 'Googie' structure. Its space-ship top participates exuberantly in a Shanghai tradition of weird roof-elaborations, and echoes a formally-comparable (though far smaller) classical modern structure to the east, down Nanjing Lu. The idea of high-rise rooftops as landing sites for flying vehicles, within a dynamic system of three-dimensional traffic, is a staple of ultramodernist speculation, whilst an alien arrival from a distant future is a transparent Shanghai fantasy.

In his path-breaking short story The Gernsback Continuum, William Gibson dubs this style ‘Raygun Gothic’, explicitly marking its time-complexity. He thus coaxes it into the wider cultural genre of retro-futurism, which applies to everything that evokes an out-dated future, and thereby transforms modernity into a counter-factual commentary on the present. This genre finds an especially rich hunting ground in Shanghai.

Dark intimations of the time-rift

Shanghai’s eclectic cityscape explores a variety of modernities simultaneously. The sheer scale of the city, exponentiated by its relentless dynamism, overflows the time-line.

During Shanghai’s early- to mid-20th century high modernist epoch, for instance, the city’s consolidating *haipai* culture was distinguished by the absence of a single core. It emerged, instead, as the outcome of loosely inter-articulated plural or parallel developments, including (but by no means limited to) the urban mores of a rising indigenous ‘bourgeoisie’, whose aspirational tributaries reached deep into the warrens of the *lilongs*; the hard accelerationism of the International Settlement business culture, dominated by near-limitless Shanghailander confidence in the city’s global significance and potential; and the left-slanted literary and political trends fostered in the coffee shop salons of the French

Concession, where *avant garde* ideas cross-pollinated promiscuously. This heterogeneous, fertile chaos found its architectural echoes in the juxtaposition of building styles, quantitatively dominated by Shanghai's native experiment in urban construction (the *lilong* block), but overawed in patches by Western neo-classical colonial edifices; Manhattanite cosmopolitan high-rises and Art Deco structures; bold adventures in Chinese modern designs (most prominently in Jiangwan); examples of proto-brutalist industrial and residential functionalism; and villas in a variety of international, hybrid, and advanced styles.

Since re-opening, in the early 1990s, Shanghai has added new ingredients to the mix, including its first major examples of construction indebted to the austere tenets of the International Style (although large rectilinear structures are still, thankfully, a rarity); neo-traditional and ethno-exotic kitsch (especially in the Old City and the peripheral 'nine-towns' respectively); neomodernist re-animations of derelicted structures; and 'Googie' evocations of imagined futures.

Whilst the city's modernization has attained unprecedented velocity, however, its native modernism remains comparatively retarded. As an urban center in China, Shanghai's distinctiveness is far less marked than it was in the early 20th century. Once occupying an overwhelmingly commanding cultural position as the engine-room and icon of Chinese modernity, today it participates in a far more generalized process of Chinese development. Its internationalism, commercial prowess, and technology absorption are no longer obviously peerless within China, its domination of the publishing and movie industries has passed, its retail giants and innovative advertising have surrendered their uniqueness, and its intellectual bohemia is matched, or surpassed, in a number of other urban centers. Whilst *haipai* tenuously persists, its dynamism has diffused and its confidence attenuated.

If Shanghai has a specific and coherent urban cultural identity today, emerging out of its sprawling multiplicity, and counterbalancing the vastly strengthened sense of national identity consolidated since the foundation of the PRC, it cannot (like *haipai*

before it) be derived from the continuity of the city's developmental trend, or from an urban exceptionalism, feeding on the contrast with a conservative, stagnant, or regressive national hinterland. A thoroughly renovated Shanghainese culture, or *xin haipai*, is inextricably entangled with the city's historical discontinuity, or interruption, and with a broader Chinese national (or even civilizational) modernization that was anticipated by the 'Old Shanghai' and revives today as a futuristic memory.

The future that had seemed inevitable to the globalizing, technophilic, piratical capitalist Shanghai of the 1920s-'30s went missing, as the momentum accumulated over a century of accelerating modernization was untracked by aerial destruction, invasion, revolution, and agrarian-oriented national integration. As the city trod water during the command economy era, the virtual future inherent in its 'Golden Age' continued to haunt it, surviving spectrally as an obscure intuition of urban destiny. Upon re-opening, in the early 1990s, this alternative fate flooded back. Under these circumstances, futurism is immediately retro-futurism, since urban innovation is what was happening before, and invention is bound to a process of re-discovery. 'Renaissance' always means something of this kind (and cannot, of course, be reduced to restoration).

This retro-futurist tendency, intrinsic to Shanghai's revival of urban self-consciousness in the new millennium, creates a standing time-loop between two epochs of highly-accelerated modernistic advance. As it steadily adjusts itself into phase, heritage and development densely cross-reference each other, releasing streams of chatter in anachronistic, cybergothic codes, such as the deeply encrypted 'language' of Art Deco. Prophetic traditions inter-mesh with commemorative innovations, automatically hunting the point of fusion in which they become interchangeable, closing the circuit of time. The past was something other than it once seemed, as the present demonstrates, and the present is something other than it might seem, as the past attests.

The most accessible examples of Shanghai's signature time-looping are spatially concentrated. At the limit, neo-modern

renovation projects connect the city's great waves of modernization within a single structure, making a retro-futural theme intrinsic to a current development, such as those at M50, Redtown, Bridge8, 1933, or the Hotel Waterhouse (among innumerable cases). Slightly wider and more thematically elaborate loops link new buildings to overt exhibitions of modernist history. Among the most conspicuous of these are the pairing of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower with the Shanghai History Museum (in its pedestal), and the Old Shanghai street-life diorama to be found beneath the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall.

Such examples can be misleading, however, if they distract from the fact that the retro-futurist principle of the new Shanghai culture is ambient. From ordinary residential restoration projects, to commercial signage, restaurant themes, hotel decor and home furnishings, the insistent message is re-emergence, an advance through the past. The latest and most stylish thing is typically that which re-attaches itself to the city's modern heritage with maximum intensity. Reaching out beyond the city does nothing to break the pattern, because that's precisely what the 'Old Shanghai' used to do. Cosmopolitan change is its native tradition.

Retro-futural couplings can be spatially dispersed. One especially prominent time loop lashes together two of the city's most celebrated high-rises -- the Park Hotel and the Jin Mao Tower -- binding the Puxi of Old Shanghai with the Pudong New Area. Each was the tallest Shanghai building of its age (judged by highest occupied floor), the Park Hotel for five decades, the Jin Mao Tower for just nine years. This discrepancy masks a deeper time-symmetry in the completion dates of the two buildings: the Park Hotel seven years prior to the closing of the city (with the Japanese occupation of the International Settlement in 1941), the Jin Mao Tower seven years after the city's formal re-opening (as the culmination of Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, in 1992).

It takes only a glance (or two) to recognize these buildings as non-identical time twins, or mutant clones, communicating with each other darkly across the rift, in Art Decode. Reciprocally attracted by

their structural and tonal resonances, the two buildings extract each other from their respective period identities and rush together into an alternative, occulted time, obscurely defined through contact with an absolute future, now partially recalled.

Both of these beautifully sinister buildings are at home in the Yin World, comfortable with secrets, and with night. Among the first of these secrets, shared in their stylistic communion, is darkness itself. Nothing could be further removed from the spirit of Le Corbusier's Radiant City than the brooding opulence of these towers, glittering on the edge of an unfathomable nocturnal gulf, as if intoxicated by the abyss. They remind us that 'Art Deco' is a (retrospective) label patched crudely over mystery, that it never had a manifesto, or a master plan, and that - due to its inarticulate self-organization - it has eluded historical comprehension.

This is the sense, at least in part, of Art Deco's pact with night and darkness. Beneath and beyond all ideologies and centralized schemes, the spontaneous culture of high-modernism that climaxed in the interbellum period remains deeply encrypted. As the new Shanghai excavates the old, it is an enigma that becomes ever more pressing.

Dieselpunk with Chinese characteristics

Wikipedia attributes the earliest use of the term 'retrofuturism' to Lloyd John Dunn (in 1983). Together with fellow 'Tape-beatles' John Heck, Ralph Johnson, and Paul Neff, Dunn was editor of the 'submagazine' Retrofuturism, which ran across the bottom of the pages of Photostatic magazine over the period 1988-93. The agenda of the Tape-beatles was artistic, and retrofurism was "defined as the act or tendency of an artist to progress by moving backwards", testing the boundaries between copying and creativity through systematic plagiarism and experimental engagement with the technologies of reproduction. Whatever the achievements of this

‘original’ retrofuturist movement, they were soon outgrown by the term itself.

A more recent and comparatively mainstream understanding of retro-futurism is represented by the websites of Matt Novak (from 2007) [1] and Eric Lefcowitz (from 2009) [2], devoted to a cultural history of the future. Specializing in a comedy of disillusionment (thoroughly spiced with nerd kitsch), these sites explore the humorous incongruity between the present as once imagined and its actual realization. Content is dominated by the rich legacy of failed predictions that has accumulated over a century (or more) of science fiction, futurology, and popular expectations of progress, covering topics from space colonization, undersea cities, extravagant urban designs, advanced transportation systems, humanoid domestic robots, and ray-guns, to jumpsuit clothing and meal pills. This genre of retro-futurism is near-perfectly epitomized by Daniel H. Wilson’s 2007 book *Where's My Jetpack?: A Guide to the Amazing Science Fiction Future that Never Arrived*. The sentiment of the genre is highly consistent and quite readily summarized: disappointment with the underperformance of the present is redeemed by amusement at the extravagant (and even absurd) promise of the past.

Retro-futurism in the missing jetpack mode can have broad historical horizons. It is only limited by the existence of adequately-specified predictions, optimally of the concrete, technologically-defined kind most suited to parodic recollection. Matt Novak’s paleofuture or “past visions of the future” index spans 130 years (from the 1870s through to the 1990s). Nevertheless, the essential characteristics of the genre disproportionately attract it to the ‘Golden Age’ of (American) science fiction, centered on the 1940s-50s, when technological optimism reached its apogee.

Dated back to the July 1939 issue of pulp SF magazine Astounding Science Fiction (edited by John W. Campbell and containing stories by Isaac Asimov and A.E. Van Vogt), or to the April 1939 opening of the dizzily futurist New York World Fair, the Golden Age might have been pre-programmed for retro-futurist ridicule. Its optimism was entirely lacking in self-doubt; its

imagination was graphically clarified by the emerging marking tools of modern advertising, PR, and global ideological politics; its favored gadgetry was lusciously visualized, large-scaled, and anthropomorphically meaningful; and an emerging consumer culture, of previously unconceived scale and sophistication, served both to package the future into a series of discrete, tangible products, and to promote aspirations of individual (or nuclear family) empowerment through consumption that would later be targeted for derision. Implausibly marrying social conservatism to techno-consumerist utopianism, every family with its own flying car is a vision that, from the start, hurtles towards retro-futurist hilarity. By the time *The Jetsons* first aired in 1962, the Golden Age had ended, and the laughter had begun.

If William Gibson's The Gernsback Continuum (1981) antedated the term 'retro-futurism', it indisputably consolidated the concept, investing it with a cultural potential that far exceeded anything the light-hearted sallies of the oughties would match. Instead of picking among the detritus of Golden Age speculation for objects of amused condescension, Gibson back-tracks its themes to the 'Raygun Gothic' or 'American Streamlined Modern' of the interbellum period, and then projects this derelicted culture forwards, as a continuous alternative history (dominated by quasi-fascist utopianism). The Gernsback Continuum is no mere collection of oddities, but rather a path not taken, and one that continued to haunt the science fiction imagination. Cyberpunk would be its exorcism.

Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967), commemorated by the 'Hugo' science fiction awards, was a futuristic fiction enthusiast and (shady) publishing entrepreneur who, more than any other identifiable individual, catalyzed the emergence of science fiction as a self-conscious genre, promoted through cheaply-printed, luridly popular 'pulp' magazines. In the first issue of Amazing Stories, which he founded in 1926, Gernsback defined 'scientifiction' as "charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." Whilst commonly detested by his abused writers, due to his sharp business practices, Gernsback's politics seem to have been unremarkable.

The ominous Aryan technocracy portrayed in The Gernsback Continuum probably owes more to the reputation of his successor at Amazing Stories, John W. Campbell (1910-1971), and the broader cultural tendencies he represented.

The re- (or pre-) direction of retro-futurism, from abandoned dreams to alternative histories, triggered a cascade of avalanches. Often, these have been marked by the wanderings of the '-punk' suffix. Initially indicative of an anti-utopian (if not necessarily positively dystopian) impulse, whose 'dirty' futurism embraces social and psychological disorder, chaotic causality, uneven development, and collapsed horizons, it increasingly adopted an additional, and previously unpredictable sense. The history of science fiction - and perhaps history more broadly - was 'punked' by the emergence of literary and cultural sub-genres that carried it down lines of unrealized potential. Cyberpunk belonged recognizably to our electronically re-engineered time-line, but steampunk, clockpunk, dieselpunk (or 'decopunk'), and atompunk - to list them in rough order of their appearance - extrapolated techno-social systems that had already been bypassed. If these were 'futures' at all, they lay not up ahead, but along branch-tracks, off to the side.

These various 'retro-punk' micro-genres could be understood in numerous ways. When conceived primarily as literature, they can be envisaged as re-animations of period features from the history of science fiction, or, more incisively, as liberations of dated futures from the dominion of subsequent time. For instance, the Victorian future of the steampunks was more than just a hazily anticipated Edwardian present, it was something else entirely, propelled in part by the real but unactualized potential of mechanical computation (as concretized in the Difference and Analytical Engines of Babbage and Lovelace).

Apprehended more theoretically, retro-punk genres echo significant debates. In particular, axial arguments on both the left and the right melt into discussions of alternative history, especially in the dieselpunk dark-heartland of the 1920s-'30s. For over half a century, European Marxism has been inextricable from counter-factual

explorations of the Soviet experience, focused on the period of maximum *Proletkult* innovation between the end of the post-civil war and the social realist clampdown presaging the Stalinist regime. The figure of Leon Trotsky as alternative history (dieselpunk) socialist hero makes no sense in any other context. On the right, American conservatism has become ever more focused on counter-factual interrogation of the Hoover/FDR-Keynesian response to the Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, understood as the moment when republican laissez-faire capitalism was supplanted by New Deal social democracy (Coolidge / Mellon ‘28 tee-shirts might still be thin on the ground, but their day might come).

Whilst Shanghai is uploading itself into a cyberpunk tomorrow as fast as any city on earth, it has few obvious time-gates opening into clockpunk, atompunk, or (more disputably) steampunk futures. With dieselpunk, however, this series of dismissals grinds immediately to a halt. If some crazed dieselpunk demigod had leased the world to use as a laboratory, the outcome would have been - to a tolerable degree of approximation - indistinguishable from Shanghai. *Xin haipai* is dieselpunk with Chinese characteristics.

Shanghai’s greatest dieselpunk counter-factual is inescapably: what if Japanese invasion had not interrupted the city’s high-modernity in 1937? What was the city turning into? Beneath that enveloping question, however, and further back, a teeming mass of alternatives clamor for attention. What if the White Terror of 1927 had not crushed the urban workers’ movement? What if the CCP had succeeded, as Song Qingling dreamed, of transforming China’s republican government from within? What if the international politics of silver had not combined with Guomindang kleptocracy to destroy the independent financial system? What if Du Yuesheng had extended his ambitions into national politics? What if the city’s de-colonization had proceeded under peace-time conditions? What if the subsequent social and economic evolution of Hong Kong had been able to occur where it was germinated, in Shanghai?

The 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party was an occasion for the whole country to lose itself

in the dark raptures of Shanghai dieselpunk. It was time to return to the 1920s, to revisit history as an adventure in contingency, before long-established actualities had been sifted from the intensity of raw potential, and to re-animate the indeterminism implicit in dramatic tension. It is improbable that the celebratory movie devoted to the establishment of the CCP, *Beginning of the Great Revival*, was deliberately formulated in the dieselpunk genre, but the nation's microbloggers recognized it for what it was, and swarmed the opportunity presented by this re-opening of the past.

The thickening of cyberspace transforms history into a playground of potentials, where things can be re-loaded, and tried in different ways. Electronic infrastructures spread and sophisticate, running actualities as multiple and variable scenarios, with increasing intolerance for rigid outcomes or frozen legacies. As the dominion of settled actuality is eroded by currents of experimentation, the past re-animates. Nothing is ever over.

The game Shanghai plays, or the story it tells, is endlessly re-started in the dieselpunk cityscape of the 1920s and '30s, where everything that anybody could want exists in dense, unexpressed potentiality - global fortunes, gangster territories, proletarian uprisings, revolutionary discoveries, literary glory, sensory intoxication, as well as every permutation of modest urbanite thriving. It is a city where anything can happen, and somewhere, at some time, everything does.

Notes

[1] http://www.paleofuture.com

[2] http://www.retrofuture.com

Twisted Times

Abe: *You should go to China*.
Joe: *I'm going to France*.
Abe: *I'm from the future. You should go to China*.
- Looper

In Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), the city of Shanghai reaches back across 30 years to draw people in. Over these decades it feeds itself based on what it is to become: the city of the future. When compared to this, everything else that happens in the movie is mere distraction, but we won't get there for a while.

Strangely enough, 'everything else' was to have been simply everything. Joe was going to Paris, and Shanghai wasn't even in the picture. That was before Chinese authorities told Johnson that they would cover the cost of the Shanghai shoot, making the film a co-production, with convenient access to the Chinese cinema market. The Old World stood no chance.

For American audiences, *Looper* played into the trend of opinion, through its contrasting urban visions of a grim, deteriorated, crime-wracked Kansas City and the splendors of a 'futuristic' Shanghai. The movie doesn't answer the question: How did America lose the future? It nevertheless accepts the premise, as something close to a pre-installed fact.

Yet if *Looper* confirmed the direction of American popular attitudes, it marked a shift on the Chinese side. Only a few years before, Western media reported with amusement that the Chinese broadcast authorities had banned time-travel fictions from the nation's airwaves, apparently concerned that the country's citizens were defecting into a pre-republican past, under the influence of narratives that "casually make up myths, have monstrous and weird plots, use absurd tactics, and even promote feudalism, superstition, fatalism and reincarnation" [1]. Now a time-travel story was being

actively recruited to close an urban promotion loop, linking Shanghai's international image to a portrayal of retro-chronic anomaly. The Shanghai time-travel industry had arrived.

Before proceeding to a multi-installment investigation of tangled time-circuitry (or Topological Meta-History), which 'time-travel' illustrates only as a crude dramatization, it is worth pausing over *Looper*'s "monstrous and weird plot". Time-travel has a uniquely intimate, and seductively morbid, relationship to both fiction and history, because it scrambles the very principle of narrative order in profundity. If Western media authorities assumed the same role of cultural custodianship that has been traditional among their Chinese peers, they too might have been compelled to denounce a genre that flagrantly subverted the foundational principle of Aristotelian poetics: that any story worthy of veneration should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. If time-travel can occur, it seems (at least initially) that order is an illusion, so that fiction and reality switch places.

From a conservative perspective, therefore, comfort is to be found in the blatant absurdity of time-travel stories (insofar as this can be confined to a *reductio ad absurdum* of the time-loop structure itself, rather than spreading outwards as the index of primordial cosmic disorder). In this respect, *Looper* is a model of tranquillization.

The *Looper* time-travel procedure is monopolized by a criminal syndicate, which utilizes it exclusively for one purpose: the disposal of awkward individuals, who are returned 30 years in time to be murdered, execution-style, by professional killers (yes: "This sounds pretty stupid" [2]). The exorbitant absurdity of this scenario might exempt it from further critical attention, were it not the symptom of more interesting things, and the doorway onto others.

The symptom first: Non-linear time-structures are shaken to pieces almost immediately, once they allow for the transportation of stuff backwards in time. *Looper* economics exposes this with particular clarity. The killers of 2044 are paid in bars of silver for

‘ordinary’ hits, and in gold for ‘closing loops’ or executing their retro-deposited older selves. The bars are sent back from 2074, and circulated through an internal exchange operation, which swaps bullion for (Chinese) paper currency. Whilst this crude time-circuit is presented as a payments system, the process described actually functions as an under-performing money-making machine. By using it, one realizes the ultimate Austrian economic nightmare by printing precious metals, because an ingot sent backwards in time is doubled, or added to its ‘previous’ instance (which already exists in the past). Mechanical re-iteration of the process would guarantee exponential growth for free. We’re not told what the 2074 criminal organization sees as its core business, but it must be seriously lucrative -- exciting enough, in any case, to distract them from the fact that their murder-fodder machine is really a bullion fast-breeder. They could have shoveled it full of diamonds, doubling their fortune each ‘time’, but they decided instead to duplicate human nuisances in 2044. The movie asks us quietly to suspend our impertinent disbelief, and trust that they know what they’re doing.

Mike Dickison’s excellent *Looper* commentary [3] succinctly describes this implicit procedure for unlimited wealth, among other incredibly missed opportunities. It surely has to count as a criticism of the movie that its rickety framework of plot coherence is dependent upon the imbecility of its significant agents, who stumble blindly past the prospect of total power in their ruthless pursuit of a miserable racket. This absurdity, as already noted, serves a conservative purpose: The potential of the loop has to be suppressed to sustain narrative drama and intelligibility. The basic flaw of the movie is that far too much was given, before most of it was clumsily taken away.

In the absence of controlling censors, Johnson’s story represses itself, messily, comically, and unconvincingly. “This time travel crap, just fries your brain like an egg,” the elder Joe (Bruce Willis) confesses on Johnson’s behalf. Unleashed time-travel is an anti-plot, inconsistent with dramatic presentation. (If you’re not willing to take Aristotle’s word for that, watching *Primer* [4] a few dozen

times should sort you out.) Narrative wreckage is what time-travel does.

Time-travel absurdity is a choice. It is a decision taken, at least semi-deliberately, for conservative or protective reasons, because the alternative would be ruin. Even the representation of (radically nonlinear) time anomaly by ‘time-travel’ is indicative of this, since it is programmed by the preservation of a narrative function (the ‘time-traveler’), regardless of conceptual expense. Far rather the incoherent jumble of matter duplication, time-line proliferation, immunized strands of personal memory, and the arbitrary inhibition of potentialities, than utter narrative disorder, fate loops, the annihilation of agency, and the emergence of an alien consistency, subverting all historical meaning.

If the mask of time-travel has slipped enough to expose some hint of the intolerable tangle beneath, we’re ready to take the next step …

(This [5] will help.)

Notes

[1] http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/12/making-tv-safer-chinese-censors-crack-down-on-time-travel

[2] http://takimag.com/article/the_scoop_on_looper_steve_sailer/print

[3] http://www.giantflightlessbirds.com/2012/10/nine-problems-with-looper-that-arent-brain-melting-time-paradoxes

[4] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390384/

[5] http://www.xibalba.demon.co.uk/jbr/chrono.html